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Mubarak's Message

The real message from Cairo, shrouded by polite terms and not put to paper, warns President Reagan that a U.S. failure to stand up to Israel will thrust the Middle East into a malignant era, with the influence of Washington and its moderate Arab allies reduced to near zero.

Reagan administration officials easily recognized that warning between the lines of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's letter to Reagan. Delivered Saturday by Egyptian Foreign Minister Kamal Hassan Ali, the letter's precise and pointed message was that the Camp David "peace" process will end beyond hope for revival if the United States does not get Israel out of Lebanon.

The president and George Shultz, his so-far silent secretary of state, face these alternatives: take on the pro-Israeli political lobby in the middle of the congressional election campaign or give Israel its head to nullify remaining U.S. influence and prestige throughout the Mideast.

Israel's freedom from U.S. restraint in its Lebanon operation has saddened Cairo and the moderate Arab world. Reagan seemed to flash another green light to Israel when he failed to react to a report from CIA Director William J. Casey last week that Israeli civilians were taking over occupation duties from the military in Lebanon.

Other indications of Israeli intentions to stay in Lebanon considerably longer than the White House wants are piling onto the president's desk. All shipping into and out of the ports of Tyre and Sidon, Lebanese cities devastated in the Israeli invasion, is being shifted to the Israeli port of Haifa. A new macadamized highway between Israel and Lebanon is used by Israeli trucks to transship cargoes.

A new office for El Al, Israel's state-owned airline, has just opened in Sidon. El Al is using an old PLO airfield with a new runway for monopoly service in densely populated southern Lebanon. The standard currency there has become the Israeli shekel.

These are signs of Israeli intentions to solidify economic and military control over the border regions and to prove to Arabs Israel can defy the United States without fear of punishment.

But the Egyptians see another motive: narrowing the Camp David autonomy talks to the United States and Israel alone. Mubarak has told the Reagan administration it is inconceivable for Egypt to negotiate with Israel on West Bank-Gaza autonomy while Israeli troops remain in occupation of one square foot of Lebanon.

That makes a prolonged Israeli stay in Lebanon all the more attractive to the designers of what Prime Minister Menachem Begin calls "eretz (greater) Israel." Begin has warned Reagan face-to-face that Israel never will negotiate West Bank autonomy except under the Camp David umbrella. If Egypt refuses to join those talks, Begin will charge Mubarak with sabotaging Camp David.

This chain of events distresses Mubarak and other pro-American Arab leaders. For Mubarak, the distress goes beyond Lebanon and the Palestine problem. Without spelling it out in morbid detail, Mubarak wants Reagan to remember that Anwar Sadat was killed by Moslem fanatics who believed he had sold his Arab birthright. That was long before Lebanon. Today, U.S. refusal to expel Israel from Lebanon could give Moslem fanaticism irresistible force.

Yet the Reagan administration has opposed Egypt's appeal to use the Beirut crisis as a lever to encourage concessions from both Israel and the PLO in hopes of forcing a Palestine solution. As the Arab moderates see it, there can only be one reason: the United States cannot bring itself to confront Israel head-on, even though failure to do so threatens future domination of the region by anti-Western fanaticism.

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